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Generating Your Own Small Group Bible Studies

By Bill Jacobs

When I was four, I told my mother I wanted a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. She was busy doing the laundry, so she told me that the bread was in the bread box; the peanut butter and jelly were in the refrigerator; I could make my own. She was taking a chance, but I managed the task without making too much of a mess. I felt a sense of satisfaction and it tasted great to my four-year-old taste buds. How old were you when you began fixing your own food? Most of us were probably pretty young.

Fixing Our Own Spiritual Food

How about your spiritual food? Who fixes it? Do you go to church and sit with others week after week eating spiritual food prepared by someone else—a pastor, perhaps? That’s somewhat like eating out. Do you listen to DVD’s or CD’s in a group or at home? That could be compared to TV dinners.

Eating out is fun, but it usually isn’t as healthful as food prepared at home. We won’t even talk about TV dinners and nutrition. Home cooked food is usually better for us: lower in fat and salt, higher in vitamins and fiber. Could the same be said of spiritual food?

When we go to a restaurant to eat, the chef or cook works hard to make the food interesting and tasty. The same is usually true of sermons given at church. The pastor works hard to keep the audience interested, but there’s a problem. The problem with those sermons is often only that we didn’t prepare them. Consequently we don’t get as much benefit. The one who prepares the sermon always learns the most from it. Talk to any teacher; they know that teaching is the best way to learn.

Paul told the Hebrews in chapter five of that book that they were spiritually immature because they had never “exercised their senses to discern good from evil.” Interestingly enough he also said they were dull of hearing. After a while attending church becomes something we do by habit. We come to church, we settle in for the sermon. Pretty soon the time has passed. We get up, talk a bit and go home. We don’t think about what we heard much at all. More often than not, if someone asks us what the sermon was about three days later, we can’t remember. Once in a while we might hear something that we

connect to, but since we didn't "exercise our senses" to prepare the sermon, the chances of it being something relevant to us is diminished.

Where would you fit along the continuum of spiritual maturity? Can you fix your own food? Or are you, as would be a small child, dependent on others for your spiritual sustenance?

Our little congregation in Albuquerque has begun to fix its own spiritual food. LifeResource Ministries takes me out of town a lot. The group listens to some of my live presentations when I am in town, and some CD's produced by other ministers when I am gone, but most of the time they like to do interactive Bible studies that they have, at least in part, prepared themselves. The benefits have been startling. People are growing! They are learning about the Bible. They are thinking about how the Bible connects to their lives, and what changes they need to make to live by it. They are also getting to know each other in a genuine, sincere way. We are learning to love each other more deeply.

We are so excited about this phenomenon that we are dedicating this page to showing others how to create their own Bible studies. Before we explain it, let me tell you why I think it works so well.

Benefits of Small Group Generated Bible Studies

Here are some of the benefits of this type of Bible Study:

- When a group of people make up their own Bible studies, it can't help but be relevant, because it came from them. People don't choose to study things they have no need of. Instead they study the topics that interest them.
- When everyone has input into the creation of the study, it's more interesting to them, because its part of them.
- When everyone participates in the study, they are more inclined to study the material beforehand.
- When people study together, they learn a lot more than if they studied alone, because each person brings a unique perspective to the discussion. When we have our senses exercised by others, we tend to grow.
- When people study together, they encourage each other and pull each other along. There are people in our group who had not studied their Bibles until they found the impetus from these studies. Now they are feeling much more confident about something that was a weakness for many years.

Are you convinced yet? To learn more about how your group can study this way, keep reading or download this material in PDF format.

Size

Our "fix your own" method works well for groups of 2-10 people with 4-8 being the optimal size. We have done these studies in larger groups, but we divide the larger groups into smaller ones to increase participation of all involved.

Types of Studies

We do four different types of studies.

- Single question study: e.g., What did Jesus mean when he said, “I came to seek and to save those who are lost?”
- Topical study: e.g., “The meaning of Pentecost”
- Reading study: e.g., 1 Corinthians 13
- What’s-on-Your-Mind studies: e.g., the group asks each other what questions they have.

Preparation: Single Question Studies

This type of study can be done with no preparation in advance by the group, though it is also possible for the facilitator to send the question to participants ahead of time. It can also be done with a larger group.

- The facilitator divides participants in groups of 4-8
- He asks the question.
- The group works together to find biblically based answers for it.

If there is more than one group working at a time, the two groups can share what they learned.

Preparation: Topical Study

Consider the following three ways to prepare a topical study.

You can:

- Procure a study already organized;
- Use a prepared study and ask the group to add to it. We almost always add to the studies we procure from other sources because they add relevance to our lives, (since we were the ones who asked the questions).
- Make up your own by asking the group to give the facilitator three/four questions with the answers on the chosen topic. Our group used this last method on Pentecost because we couldn't find a study on that topic. The facilitator organizes the questions and then sends them out to the entire group about a week before the study, so they can study them.

The facilitator then follows the Facilitator Guidelines at the bottom of this article.

We've found that it is important to talk as a group about the topics to study. Make sure everyone has an opportunity to give input.

Preparation: Reading Study

Once the group selects a passage, the facilitator asks for volunteers to bring formation from various bible helps. The Life Application Bible and the NIV Study Bible are good choices.

Once the group convenes, the facilitator asks people to read the bible verse by verse and comment or read from their Bible helps or research they have done.

Preparation: What's-on-Your-Mind Studies

I know this method works because I attended one of these studies. A group of young adults invited me to attend with them at the Feast one year. It was in a condo, so everyone was sitting around the room on chairs and the couch. "What should we study about," someone asked? There were several ideas put forward. After a bit, they all agreed on one topic. From that beginning a spirited and free ranging discussion on wisdom developed. Many scriptures were quoted; questions asked; personal examples were shared. Everyone expressed satisfaction with the study when it was over. I learned a lot. It was relevant to the lives of those present. It was something they all wanted to know more about.

How did that happen? I believe that where two or three are gathered, there Christ will be also. When we allow the Holy Spirit to guide us, the results are solid.

I'm hoping our group can use this type of study because I think it would help us go places in our relationships we haven't gone yet. And I think it's good for those occasions where people find themselves together, not having anything prepared.

Facilitation

The first thing our group does is ask for volunteers to facilitate. It has generally turned out that everyone in our group takes turns at facilitating. This role is one of service and not authority. Even older teens are capable and often willing. It's not hard at all.

Here are the guidelines our facilitators follow:

- The facilitator asks someone to open the study with prayer.
- After brief opening remarks, the facilitator goes around the circle, asking each person to read or answer questions or scriptures in turn. This approach deals with an important aspect of group dynamics—some people will want to talk more and other less. Moving around the circle helps even that out a bit.
- After the person gives an answer, the facilitator asks for other comments from the group.
- After discussion by group on the question, the facilitator may comment.
- If a person does not wish to answer a question they may pass. No pressure or judgment.
- Facilitator gently keeps the discussion moving and the group on task.

Participant Instructions

The attitude the participants bring to the discussion determines the success of it. Here are few considerations:

- **Preparation:** Contribute to the study, as requested, ahead of time; and make an effort to study the material the group chooses to study before the study begins.
- **Participation:** Some people can develop their ideas more quickly than others. Consequently, they can verbalize them more quickly as well. This has very little to do with the quality of their comments. In fact, often those who take longer to formulate their ideas produce a higher quality of thought. If you are one of those who take a bit longer, don't let that hold you back from participating. The around-the-table format should provide you time to think.
- **Personal Agendas:** Have you ever encountered someone who had a personal agenda that they couldn't set aside? Every discussion always ends up on their point of fixation. Leave all those at home, if you want to participate successfully in a small group Bible study. Stay on the topic the group has selected. Show respect for the others in the group. Exhibiting humility generates unity.
- **Seek First to Understand:** Sometimes in these studies we hear new things. Sometimes these new things we don't understand or agree with. This type of format does require a measure of spiritual maturity. We must be able to examine things we've never thought of before and tolerate opinions we don't hold. Immaturity causes some people to shrink back from this type of study. They are afraid of differences. On the other hand, the only way people can come together is through examination of differences. Those who are immature often feel they must challenge every idea that makes them uncomfortable. Challenging the position of others tends to create defensiveness. We are much more likely to come to agreement or understanding if we ask questions, seek clarification, and explore issues. When a challenge is presented without first seeking to fully understand the issue, it usually misses the mark, making the one who challenged appear uninformed, and frustrating the one challenged.
- **Arguing:** It would be difficult to argue with someone if both of them were following the guidelines already given. However, we feel the use of the word is necessary here because some people seem to need to put themselves in opposition to others without realizing what they are doing. We do not argue over the Word of God. In our Bible studies we try to understand God's Word, understand the views of others regarding the Word of God, and express our own views as well.
- **Trust God:** Jesus tells us that when two or three are gathered in his name, he will be with us. When those present are guided and motivated by the Holy Spirit, then peace and growing together is always going to be the result, because we can trust in God to provide what he promises. If, in that rare instance when a group doesn't experience both peace and a growing together, then it is appropriate to talk, in a loving way, about what is going on in the group.